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MARTYRS FOR THE ENGLISH BIBLE

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A period of thirty years, in the middle of the sixteenth century, when Luther and Calvin were doing their reforming work on the Continent, was the critical time in the history of the English Bible. Then came the heroes who died for the people that they might read the Bible and conduct their worship of God in their own language. Today, with a free Bible in all languages and in all hands, we do well to recall that this privilege was dearly bought. Four hundred years ago the Bible was the possession of the priests, written in an ancient language which only the learned could read; and the church considered it inadvisable for the people to know the Bible except as it was taught to them by the priests.

Many men died as martyrs in England because they had undertaken to translate, distribute, and establish in use the English Bible. The foremost of these was William Tyndale, 1492-1536 A.D., Bible scholar and translator, reformer and witness unto death for English Protestantism. He was educated at Oxford and Cambridge, at a time when Erasmus was declaring:

The sun itself is not more common and open to all than the teaching of Christ. I utterly dissent from those who are unwilling that the Sacred Scriptures should be read by the unlearned, translated into their own vernacular tongue; as though Christ had taught such subtleties that they can scarcely be understood even by a few theologians,

or as though the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it. . . . I wish the Scriptures were translated into all languages, so that they might be read and understood, not only by Scots and Irishmen, but also by Turks and Saracens. To make them understood is surely the first step. . . . I long that the husbandman should sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plow, that the weaver should hum them to the tune of his shuttle.

With this same feeling and purpose Tyndale was soon saying to a learned churchman: "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth a plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou." He said that he was moved to translate the New Testament because he saw that "it was impossible to establish the people in any truth unless the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother-tongue." He tried to get assistance for his English Bible from church leaders, but without success. He found that "there was no place in all England to translate the New Testament." But certain English laymen, merchants of London, furnished necessary money, and in 1524 Tyndale went to the Continent, where by secrecy he could escape persecution while doing his work as translator. At Cologne he succeeded in getting a portion of the New Testament into print, but a spying priest notified the

church authorities in England. Tyndale made his escape to Worms, where he published two complete editions. For safety his name did not appear on the title-page, and he said: "I followed the counsel of Christ which exhorted men to do their good deeds secretly." But he was not afraid; it was only that he would postpone martyrdom until he could give the whole Bible to the English people. These editions of the English New Testament were shipped to England hidden in with other merchandise, consigned to Tyndale's merchant friends at London. Authorities of church and state, though watchful and active, were circumvented by this strategy, and several thousand English New Testaments circulated influentially through England.

Tyndale's translation was made with much scholarship directly from Erasmus' printed Greek text, with the help of the Vulgate, Erasmus' Latin version, Luther's German Testament, and Wycliffe's English Bible. It became the basis of all subsequent editions of the English New Testament, including the Authorized Version of 1611 and the Revised Version of 1881.

The Roman church in England publicly denounced Tyndale and his New Testament. Copies of his translation were publicly burned in London and in Oxford. "In burning the New Testament," Tyndale said, "they did no other thing than I looked for; no more shall they do if they burn me also; if it be God's will, it shall so be." Before he could complete his translation of the Old Testament he was arrested for his reforming zeal and was burned at the stake, a fate that he foresaw would be

the price of his devotion to the cause of a free Bible.

In Tyndale's time the church service throughout England was still conducted in Latin, as was the practice of the Roman church everywhere. Colet, England's greatest New Testament scholar and professor of that date at Oxford University, Tyndale's chief teacher and bishop of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, was denounced for teaching his congregation to recite the Lord's Prayer in English. Colet advocated also that the preaching be done in English, but this was not tolerated. In 1539 five Scotchmen were burned at the stake in Edinburgh for studying, memorizing, and preaching from the Bible. One of them was charged with teaching his parishioners to say the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments in English. Taverner, who published an English Bible in 1539, was at an earlier time, while a student at Oxford, imprisoned for reading Tyndale's New Testament. Marbeck, who in 1550 published the first concordance to the English Bible, narrowly escaped being put to death. Thomas Matthew, who published an English Bible in 1537, the year following Tyndale's martyrdom, was—like him—burned at the stake in 1555.

These were acts of the Roman Catholic church in England, operating through her cardinals and other agents upon the English king. Rome was fighting desperately to maintain her domination of England. She knew that an English Bible and church worship in English would work toward national religious independence and a Protestant establishment. At the Council of Trent in 1546 the Catholic church condemned and

prohibited all vernacular versions of the Bible, requiring that the Bible should be read and used only in the Vulgate Latin. Cochlaeus spoke for the Romanists when he said:

The New Testament translated into vernacular is the food of death, the fuel of sin, the veil of malice, the pretext of false liberty, the protection of disobedience, the corruption of discipline, the depravity of morals, the termination of concord, the death of honesty, the well-spring of vices, the instigation of rebellion, the milk of pride, the nourishment of contempt, the death of peace, the destruction of charity, the enemy of unity, the murderer of truth.

That was the point of view from which the Roman opposition was made to vernacular translations of the Bible, and to the knowledge of the Bible among the people. Those who so thought, regarded extreme persecution necessary and justifiable. They were sincere, but mistaken—greatly mistaken. The reforming Protestant view, that the Bible was for all, was better. As Tyndale said:

It is not enough to read and talk of the Bible only, but we must also desire God, day and night, instantly to open our eyes, and to make us understand and feel wherefore the Scripture was given, that we may apply the medicine of Scripture, every man to his own sores.

The Roman Catholic opposition to the English Bible had been at this time in progress for one hundred and fifty years. It had begun with the public condemnation of Wycliffe about 1380 A.D., the year in which he completed his translation of the New Testament from the Vulgate, so that the English people might study the Bible. He said: "Christian men ought much to travail

day and night about the text of Holy Writ, and especially the Gospel in their mother-tongue." Copies of his Bible were made by hand and were soon much in use among all the people. Even the king and the nobles read them. In 1391 a bill was introduced into Parliament to forbid the circulation of the English Scriptures; this bill was defeated. But in 1408 a convocation of the church, sitting at Oxford, prohibited the translation of any part of the Holy Scriptures into English by any unauthorized person, or the reading of any translation, made either in Wycliffe's time or since, until it was first formally approved. Yet this edict, and many severe punishments of its transgressors, did not stop the use of the English Bible.

In Tyndale's time we have seen how the prohibitions and persecutions of the Wycliffe period were resumed, with increasing number and severity. In 1530 the English Bible was condemned on the ground that "the divulging of this Scripture at this time in the English tongue would tend rather to people's further confusion and destruction than to the edification of their souls." In 1543 Parliament enacted that "no woman (unless she be a noble or gentle woman), no artificers, apprentices, journeymen, serving men under the degree of yeomen . . . and no husbandmen or laborers should read or use any part of the Bible under pains of fine and imprisonment." Edict followed edict, and martyrdom followed martyrdom, in this conflict for the right of the people to read the Bible in their own language. In the Preface to the Great Bible of 1539 the publishers said: "The Bishop of Rome conferred on King Henry VIII

the title of Defender of the Faith, because his Highness suffered the Bishops to burn God's Word, the root of Faith, and to persecute the lovers and ministers of the same." But the burning of the translations and the persecution of the translators could not prevent the Reformation. Tyndale had died saying: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"

Better days were near at hand. England was about to dethrone Catholicism and to make Protestantism the state religion in its place. This change was to include the establishment of the English Bible over the Vulgate Latin Bible, to place the Bible in the hands of clergy and laymen for reading and study, and to cause the preaching and worship of the church to be conducted in the English language. Henry VIII, in 1530, in connection with his prohibition of the English Bibles then in print, had said that he would himself have the New Testament "by learned men faithfully and purely translated." But this was only a word of procrastination. Henry was favorable to the English Bible, but Romanism gave him orders. Latimer and Cranmer, two of the great English reformers, kept reminding the King of his promise. Seven years afterward, in 1537, Henry allowed the Matthew Bible to bear upon its title-page the words, "Set forth with the King's most gracious license," which made this the first authorized English version. Thereupon Thomas Cromwell, a reformer whom Henry had placed next himself as vice-regent of the king of England in spiritual affairs, obtained also from

Henry a license that this authorized English Bible "might be sold and read of every person, without danger of any act, proclamation, or ordinance heretofore granted to the contrary, until such time that we, the Bishops, shall set forth a better translation—which I think will not be till a day after Doomsday."

The Great Bible of 1539 was prepared and published with royal consent and under Cromwell's supervision. On its title-page was a decorative design representing King Henry VIII, Cranmer, and Cromwell giving the Bible in English to the people. The clergy were then directed to provide without delay "one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English" to be set up in the churches, the cost to be divided between them and their parishioners; and the clergy were to "expressly provoke, stir, and exhort every person to read the same, as that which is the very lively Word of God." The Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments were to be recited in English.

The splendid Protestant leaders who accomplished this great liberty for England soon were put to death for their defiance of the Pope. Cromwell was beheaded the very next year, 1540, Latimer was burned at the stake in 1555, and Cranmer in 1556. But Protestantism now became dominant in England, and in 1558 succeeded in establishing its supremacy by seating Queen Elizabeth on the throne. Soon the English Bible became the accepted Bible of state and church, and the free possession of all the people.